# Analytical Writing Activity by Shawn Teo

Robert Lowell’s poetry is more about the decay of society than an investigation of self. Do you agree?

Lowell as poet has often been regarded as a ‘confessional’ poet due to the nature of his works explicitly and unashamedly conveying his personal experiences. His poems Skunk Hour, Waking in the Blue and Commander Lowell, demonstrate Lowell’s self-introspection through their writing as they deal with his feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. However beyond the initial presumption that his poems deal only with an investigation of self, his criticisms of society are far more compelling and universal throughout his poems. Robert Lowell’s inclusion of an investigation of self, only serves to explore the effects that decaying society has upon an individual on a personal level.

In his poem Skunk Hour, Lowell explores the nature of society through a series of vignettes in the first four stanzas. Lowell begins his poem somewhat cryptically, giving seemingly incongruent images of an old heiress, a deceased millionaire and a homosexuality whose sexuality is threatened. These images are representative of the decaying society which Lowell observed. The act of the heiress “[buying] up all the eyesores facing her shore and [letting] them fall”, is a directly linked to this idea of decay. The negative tone created by the words ‘eyesores’ and ‘fall’ reinforces the social decline inferred by the metaphorical act of letting the houses ‘fall’. Also the homosexual finding “no money in his work” which forces him to “marry” is suggestive of a similar concept. Within Lowell’s representation of a hopeless society, the homosexual’s identity is threatened as the objectification of his identity through “orange” is challenged by the simple yet profound statement that “there is no money in his work.” Hence Lowell establishes a bleak perspective of society in Skunk Hour, to generate a suitable framework to the further conclusions that can be drawn from his writing in the latter four stanzas of the poem.

Following the images of a decaying society in Skunk Hour’s exposition, is a shift in the perspective to the poet himself, as he conducts a self-introspection that primarily explores how this decaying society has affected him as a member of that society. Lowell’s poetry is not so much a self-investigation, than it is an investigation into the ways in which he has been the product of a decaying society, using himself to realise the failures of his own society. The emptiness and sombreness of the atmosphere he creates through language linking to death of “dark night”, the “hill’s skull” and “graveyard shelves” parallels the entire idea of the decaying society, especially with the loneliness of the heiress. The poet’s voyeurism appears to be the result of his own way with dealing with the emptiness that society has failed to fill. His self-introspection occurs in his statements that “...my mind is not right”. The uses of ellipses, emphasises the startling honesty of his realisation of his insanity. Furthermore when the poet states “I myself am hell; nobody’s here”, the literary reference emphasises the poet’s feelings of estrangement and isolation from society. Hence Lowell’s inclusion of his ‘confessional’ emotions only appear to be extensions of his exploration of the decline in society whilst the forsaken members of this society can only be a reflection of the state of the society itself.

It is also within Commander Lowell, that Lowell privileges his criticisms of society over the personal emphases he places in the poem. The poem Commander Lowell may be a poem of his father that on face-value derides his father as pathetic and scorns him for the poor life choices he made. But given the contradictory nature of the first stanza, the poem may be Lowell’s satire of society. Within the first stanza, of a poem whose title is undeniably referring to his father, he mentions his mother. The negative tone of the first stanza implies his severe dissatisfaction with his childhood. “Her voice was still electric with a hysterical, unmarried panic,” uses auditory imagery with negative connotations. Lowell’s view of his mother is immediately negative as he also mocks her with the reference to “long-nosed Marie Louise”. Also his dissatisfaction as a child is represented by his hyperbole of having “used to dope” himself asleep and as a “sheep”, implying her heavy-handedness in her bringing-up of him. Furthermore from the first stanza, there are subtle references that the poem genuinely concerns the nature of society; his mention of the “Napoleon book” utilises Napoleon as a symbol. Napoleon becomes a symbol of affluence and the hypocrisy of the Brahmin class of Boston, due to the historical context of Napoleon’s appointment as Emperor of France after having deposed of a monarchy during the French Revolution. Hence, Lowell’s mother’s admiration for Napoleon furthers the idea that his mother was obsessed with social status and absorbed in all the hypocrisies of high-class society. Consequently it is from the first stanza, that it is inferred that it is with those values of high-class pretence that Lowell’s father is judged. The observation that he was “cheerful and cowed/ Among the seadogs at the Sunday yacht club,” uses the derogatory term such ‘seadogs’ to emphasise Lowell’s criticism of high-class Bostonian society. Thus Commander Lowell’s significance lies not in the superficiality of Lowell’s disillusionment towards his father, but the way in which an arrogant and hostile society perceived him as such.

Robert Lowell’s poems through their confessional nature reveal Lowell’s deeper insights into the decay of society. Through his poetry, the evident internal conflicts of the poem’s protagonists are reflections of the societies that they exist within. Lowell essentially conveys how only the imperfect and decaying societies could have produced the disturbed character we see in Skunk Hour, or misjudged and condemned Lowell’s father in Commander Lowell.